

From: Terje Rod-Larsen <[REDACTED]>
To: "[REDACTED]" <Jeevacation@gmail.com>
Subject: Fw: Syria articles (WP, NYT)
Date: Wed, 30 Mar 2011 15:58:53 +0000

From: Fabrice Aidan <aidan@un.org>
To: Terje Rod-Larsen
Sent: Wed Mar 30 08:04:39 2011
Subject: Fw: Syria articles (WP, NYT)

Fabrice Aidan
United Nations
[REDACTED]

From: COResources [REDACTED]
Sent: 03/30/2011 08:03 AM AST
To: [REDACTED]; [REDACTED]; mahlem@co-resources.net; napierj@co-resources.net; [REDACTED]; [REDACTED]; smallb@co-resources.net
Subject: Syria articles (WP, NYT)

Summary: Syrian President Assad is highly unlikely to enact reform, and as such the US must be prepared to support those in Syria seeking change, opines a Washington Post editorial. Ahead of a planned address, Assad will attempt to hold onto power even as he effectively sacks much of his government, according to a Washington Post op-ed. Assad could use the address as an opportunity to enact actual reform, writes a New York Times op-ed. US Senator Kerry has indicated that this is Assad's final chance to prove he can change his ways, states a Washington Post op-ed. Israel would prefer that Assad stay in power, as he has kept the Syrian-Israeli border quiet for some time, reports the same publication.

Washington Post Editorial
Can Syria's dictator reform?
March 29, 2011

"MANY OF THE members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer." Thus did Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton respond to a question on Sunday about Bashar al-Assad, the latest Arab dictator to respond with fusillades to calls by his people for democratic change. At the time she spoke, more than 60 Syrians had already been massacred by Mr. Assad's security forces; others have since fallen.

Ms. Clinton was only reflecting a piece of wishful thinking to which the Obama administration and its congressional allies have tenaciously clung: that Mr. Assad, despite his brutality, sponsorship of terrorism and close alliance with Iran, can somehow be turned into a Western ally.

Encouraged by hints that the 45-year-old Mr. Assad has dropped in meetings with congressional delegations and journalists, this theory supposes that the dictator is willing to break with the Hamas leaders he hosts in Damascus; that he will see that it is in his interest to negotiate a peace agreement with Israel; and that, his record to date notwithstanding, he truly wants to liberalize his regime. As recently as last November, Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman and frequent Obama administration surrogate who

has met with Mr. Assad several times in the past two years, declared: “I remain absolutely convinced there is an opportunity to have a different relationship with Syria.”

Mr. Assad has never delivered on any of his hints — and now his security forces are openly slaughtering marchers in cities around the country. But on Tuesday his cabinet resigned, and his aides are promising that he will soon deliver a speech lifting a repressive emergency law and laying out other reforms. Consequently, the Obama administration and interlocutors such as Mr. Kerry have not yet given up on him. Says Mr. Kerry: “It’s a seminal moment. . . . You have to find out what they are prepared to do.”

We don’t believe that Mr. Assad could deliver on promises of reform even if he wished to. His minority Alawite sect, which represents only 6 percent of Syria’s population, would quickly lose power in a more democratic system. Most likely the dictator, like Mr. Mubarak before him, is seeking to deflect the demands for change with a mixture of violence and false promises. If that proves to be the case, the Obama administration, Mr. Kerry and others who have reached out to Mr. Assad should be ready to respond — by siding decisively with those in Syria seeking genuine change.

Washington Post

Bashar al-Assad stages his own coup

Op-ed by David Ignatius

March 29, 2011

Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad is attempting a new survival tactic in this Arab Spring — organizing what looks like a coup against his own government. Over the next 48 hours, it should become clear whether he has the political muscle and dexterity to pull off this unusual maneuver.

Assad dismissed his cabinet ministers Tuesday, and his backers encouraged massive public demonstrations of support in Damascus, Aleppo and other Syrian cities. Photographs showed huge crowds; a Syrian source claimed that 2 million Assad supporters had assembled in Damascus and 1 million in Aleppo, but it’s impossible to confirm these numbers.

In their effort to turn the tables on protesters, the regime used Facebook as one of its tools to summon demonstrators. The social networking site was officially approved in Syria less than two month ago.

Assad has deliberately avoided making any public pronouncements so far, leaving those mostly to his pro-reform adviser Bouthaina Shaaban. She said last week that Assad would repeal Syria’s emergency law, end the Baath Party’s monopoly on power, reform the judiciary and combat the corruption that is endemic in Syria.

The decisive moment could come as early as Wednesday, when Assad may give the major speech the public has been expecting. He is said to have waited because he didn’t want to be caught in the same cycle as Egypt’s deposed president, Hosni Mubarak, who made a series of speeches announcing modest concessions, each of which only fueled the demand for more.

Assad appears to be holding his cards for one big play, a move that his wily father, President Hafez al-Assad, would have endorsed.

Information I gathered from sources on Tuesday about the political jockeying inside Syria fits with what I heard from inside the Assad camp when I was in Damascus a month ago.

A measure of Assad’s seriousness is whether he moves to curtail the political and economic power of his own family. The lightning rod for public protest against corruption, for example, is Assad’s cousin Rami Makhluf, who has been a major shareholder in the cellphone franchise known as Syriatel. I wrote last month after visiting Damascus that Assad planned to press Makhluf to reduce his Syriatel holdings, as a symbol of his broader reform effort. That’s still said to be on Assad’s agenda.

The Assad clan also has military power that could obstruct Bashar's reformist moves. His brother Maher, for example, commands a tough unit of Syrian special forces, and his brother-in-law Assaf Shaukat has been a senior intelligence official. It's anyone's guess, at this point, whether the Assads will remain united behind Bashar or fall into a bloody internal feud, but so far Bashar has proved the master of the situation.

Syria had been relatively stable compared with its Arab neighbors until about 10 days ago, when thousands of protesters in the southern city of Deraa took to the streets to protest the killings of several youths there. Deraa is a tribal city, and the clans united in their anger against the provincial governor, Faisal Kalthoum, and his chief of security. Security forces opened fire on the demonstrators and some were killed.

The protests then began to spread, most dangerously to Latakia, a city in the north with a mixed population of Sunni Muslims and Alawite Muslims, the latter a minority sect from which Assad and other members of the elite are drawn. The violence has led to more than 50 dead nationwide so far. Some pro-reform members of the Assad government have referred to the dead protesters as "martyrs," a sign of their eagerness to connect Assad with the wave of change that is sweeping the Arab world.

New York Times
The Syrian President I Know
Op-ed by DAVID W. LESCH
March 29, 2011

San Antonio, Tex.

WHERE has President Bashar al-Assad of Syria been this past week?

Thousands of Syrians across the country have staged demonstrations against the government, and dozens of protesters have been reported killed by security forces. The cabinet was dismissed on Tuesday, although that's a meaningless gesture unless it's followed by real reform. Through it all Mr. Assad has remained so quiet that rumors were rampant that he had been overthrown. But while Syrians are desperate for leadership, it's not yet clear what sort of leader Mr. Assad is going to be.

Will he be like his father, Hafez al-Assad, who during three decades in power gave the security forces virtually a free hand to maintain order and sanctioned the brutal repression of a violent Islamist uprising in the early 1980s? Or will he see this as an opportunity to take Syria in a new direction, fulfilling the promise ascribed to him when he assumed the presidency upon his father's death in 2000?

Mr. Assad's background suggests he could go either way. He is a licensed ophthalmologist who studied in London and a computer nerd who likes the technological toys of the West; his wife, Asma, born in Britain to Syrian parents, was a banker at J. P. Morgan. On the other hand, he is a child of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the cold war. Contrary to American interests, he firmly believes Lebanon should be within Syria's sphere of influence, and he is a member of a minority Islamic sect, the Alawites, that has had a chokehold on power in Syria for decades.

In 2004 and 2005, while writing a book on him, I had long interviews with Mr. Assad; after the book was published, I continued to meet with him as an unofficial liaison between Syria and the United States when relations between the two countries deteriorated. In that time I saw Mr. Assad evolve into a confident and battle-tested president.

I also saw him being consumed by an inert Syrian system. Slowly, he replaced those of questionable loyalty with allies in the military, security services and in the government. But he does not have absolute power. He has had to bargain, negotiate and manipulate pockets of resistance inside the government and the business community to bring about reforms, like allowing private banks and establishing a stock exchange, that would shift Syria's

socialist-based system to a more market-oriented economy.

But Mr. Assad also changed along the way. When I met with him during the Syrian presidential referendum in May 2007, he voiced an almost cathartic relief that the people really liked him. Indeed, the outpouring of support for Mr. Assad would have been impressive if he had not been the only one running, and if half of it wasn't staged. As is typical for authoritarian leaders, he had begun to equate his well-being with that of his country, and the sycophants around him reinforced the notion. It was obvious that he was president for life. Still, I believed he had good intentions, if awkwardly expressed at times.

Even with the escalating violence there, it's important to remember that Syria is not Libya and President Assad is not Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. The crackdown on protesters doesn't necessarily indicate that he is tightening his grip on power; it may be that the secret police, long given too much leeway, have been taking matters into their own hands.

What's more, anti-Assad elements should be careful what they wish for. Syria is ethnically and religiously diverse and, with the precipitous removal of central authority, it could very well implode like Iraq. That is why the Obama administration wants him to stay in power even as it admonishes him to choose the path of reform.

Today, President Assad is expected to announce that the country's almost 50-year emergency law, used to stifle opposition to the regime, is going to be lifted. But he needs to make other tough choices, including setting presidential term limits and dismantling the police state. He can change the course of Syria by giving up that with which he has become so comfortable.

The unrest in Syria may have afforded President Assad one last chance at being something more than simply Hafez al-Assad's son.

David W. Lesch, a professor of Middle East history at Trinity University, is the author of "The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria."

Washington Post
John Kerry's message to Syria
Op-ed by Jackson Diehl
March 29, 2011

DURING THE past two years Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass) has emerged as the Obama administration's key interlocutor with Syrian president Bashar al Assad. Now he is putting the dictator on notice that he has reached a make-or-break moment in his relationship with the United States.

Kerry has promoted the view that "engagement" between the United States and Syria could change the orientation of a regime that has been Iran's closest Arab ally, and a weapons supplier to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. As recently as last November, Kerry said after meeting Assad: "I remain absolutely convinced that there is an opportunity to have a different relationship with Syria."

That was before Assad responded to mass protests in cities around his country beginning two weeks ago with brutal repression. So far more than 60 people have been slaughtered by his security forces for taking to the streets to shout slogans such as "we want only freedom" and "no to Iran."

In an interview Tuesday, Kerry told me that he had contacted senior Syrian officials to demand an end to the killing. "I delivered as strong a message as I can that they have to avoid violence and listen to their people and respond," he said. "Obviously the way the government has behaved is unacceptable. Sixty-one people killed is terrible, its abhorrant behavior."

Now Kerry, like people across Syria, is waiting to hear a speech that Assad's aides have promised he will deliver

outlining a political liberalization in response to demonstrations across the country. "It's a significant test," Kerry said. "It's a seminal moment." The senator has heard promises of reform from the regime in the past. "I've always said, 'put it to the test, don't take it at face value,' Kerry said. "You have to find out what people are prepared to do."

Kerry indicated that he thinks Assad could still redeem himself with his people and with the United States. "If he responds, if he moves to lift the emergency law, to provide a schedule for a precise set of reforms and a precise set of actions....we might begin to question whether something different is happening," Kerry said.

In the meantime, the senator said he doesn't favor aggressive action by the United States to bring the violence in Syria before the UN Security Council or seek sanctions, as was done when Libya's Moammar Gaddafi began attacking his people last month. "I think it's premature," Kerry said. "You have to see what develops in the next hours. It could reach that point. I don't think that with this fact pattern that is the choice to make."

Trouble for Assad would seem to be a good thing for the United States, given his alliance with Iran and sponsorship of Hezbollah and Hamas. But Kerry says he worries about what could happen in a Syrian power vacuum. "Given Israel there are paramount considerations of what or what not might ensue," he said. "There are a lot of question marks and they need to be profoundly thought through."

Whether the U.S. would benefit from the downfall of Assad "depends on which Assad you are talking about," Kerry said. "It depends on which direction the country is going in. It also depends on what the alternatives are."

As Kerry sees it, we may soon see which Assad will emerge from Syria's turmoil.

Washington Post
Israel, long critical of Assad, may prefer he stay after all
By Janine Zacharia
Wednesday, March 30, 2011

TEL AVIV — Israel has long complained about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's alliance with Iran, his support for the Shiite militia Hezbollah and his sheltering of leaders from Palestinian militant groups, such as Hamas, in Damascus.

But with Assad facing the most serious threat to his rule since he took power nearly 11 years ago, Israelis have been forced to confront the notion that they may well be better off with him than without him.

Assad, like his father before him, has ensured that the Israeli-Syrian border has remained Israel's quietest front for decades, enabling that country's northern residents to flourish in an atmosphere of relative peace even as the two nations remain technically in a state of war.

The possibility that the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood or radical groups could rise to power in place of Syria's secular, stable leadership has prompted fear among some Israelis. Watching the Muslim Brotherhood gain a foothold in Egypt's political system after the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak has only fed an Israeli squeamishness about the prospect of regime change in Damascus.

As one member of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's cabinet put it, "We know Assad. We knew his father. Of course, [redacted] love to have a democratic Syria as our neighbor. But do I think that's going to happen? No."

For now, there is little that Israel can do other than sit and monitor the demonstrations in Syria, which have drawn thousands to the streets over the past 10 days and led to clashes with security services, leaving at least 60 people dead. On Tuesday, the Syrian cabinet resigned in an effort to prop up Assad, who is expected to lift a repressive emergency law and ease other restrictions.

“We’ve had a dictator, but it’s been very quiet,” a senior Israeli military commander said. “On the other hand, it’s absolutely clear to us that the Syrians play a negative role” in the region.

Syria, whose leadership is Alawite, a minority that constitutes an offshoot of Shiite Islam, has long supported Iran and its Shiite ally in south Lebanon, Hezbollah. Although Israel sees Iran as Hezbollah’s chief patron, officials regard Syrian support as no less crucial.

Israeli military officials say the majority of weapons that Hezbollah has stashed in south Lebanon since a 2006 conflict with Israel were made or supplied by Syria, including short-range Scud missiles as well as 302mm rockets, which, when fired from southern Lebanon, could reach Tel Aviv.

Syrian officials have denied supplying weapons to Hezbollah. In April, after Israel first accused Syria of supplying the Scuds to Hezbollah, Hasan Nasrallah, the head of the group, refused to comment.

During a visit to Moscow this month, Israeli media reported, Netanyahu pleaded with Russia not to sell Syria anti-ship missiles for fear that they could be transferred to Hezbollah. But his request was rebuffed.

Israeli military officials said in interviews that most of Hezbollah’s weapons are covertly transferred by truck from arms depots near Damascus to storage facilities in southern Lebanon.

Israeli intelligence asserts that Hezbollah has built hundreds of bunkers and filled them with Syrian-made weapons, all since 2006, the last time Israel attacked the Shiite militia.

A map of alleged Hezbollah installations provided to The Washington Post this week by Israeli military officials identifies more than 550 underground bunkers, 300 surveillance sites and 100 other facilities.

In releasing the map, the Israeli military appeared to be trying to preempt international criticism of any future offensive against the alleged sites, many of which are located in residential villages alongside hospitals, schools and even civilian homes.

Military commanders say they want to avoid the kind of international rebuke Israel received after it launched an operation in late 2008 to try to stop Palestinian militants from firing rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israeli towns. About 1,300 Palestinians were killed in that offensive.

“Our interest is to show the world that the Hezbollah organization has turned these villages into fighting zones,” the senior Israeli commander said.

Israeli military officials and analysts said Assad’s departure could lead to a break in Syria’s support for Hezbollah.

“A different regime is not naturally an ally of Hezbollah and the Iranians,” said Ehud Ya’ari, a commentator on Arab affairs for Israel’s Channel 2 television station.

“People would very much like to see Assad gone and his whole regime replaced,” Ya’ari said in an interview. “That doesn’t mean they don’t have concerns about what’s coming next.”